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The Iranian Nuclear Challenge and the GCC

The Iranian nuclear crisis began in August 2002 when newspapers reported that Iran was secretly constructing two nuclear facilities: a uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and a heavy-water research reactor at Arak¹. Iran's failure to disclose its nuclear activities violated the transparency requirements of its safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). News of the Natanz and Arak facilities engendered grave concern because they could be used to produce fissile materials essential for nuclear weapons. Iran had no civilian need for such capabilities or materials.

Iran's leaders insist that they do not want nuclear weapons. They say that possessing or using nuclear weapons would violate their religious principles, and that the IAEA has not proved that they seek nuclear weapons. Iran has provided information necessary to answer many of the Agency's questions, but has refused to provide the Agency with information and access that would enable it to conclude that all of Iran's nuclear activities and materials have been declared and are exclusively peaceful.

Iran has insisted that it and all other countries have the "right" to enrich uranium under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Iranians have won the political struggle over this issue: other countries, including the United States, now acknowledge the "right" to fuel-cycle capabilities for states that are complying with their nonproliferation obligations. But six legally binding UN Security Council resolutions have been passed requiring Iran to «suspend all uranium enrichment-related and reprocessing activities» to help build international confidence that Iran's nuclear activities do not pose a threat to international peace and security. Thus, while Iran may have the right to enrich uranium, it also has a temporary obligation to suspend the exercise of this right in order to build international confidence.

Iran and the U.S., France, the U.K., Russia, China and Germany, the P5+1, have remained at an impasse over these issues since 2005. Each time the international community has increased pressure on Iran, it has responded by escalating its nuclear activities to demonstrate its own resolve.

If Iran's leaders genuinely do not want to acquire nuclear weapons, as they insist is the case for religious² and practical reasons, but also will not give up enrichment, then it should be nonetheless possible for the P5+1 to negotiate arrangements with Tehran that give the world confidence that all of Iran's nuclear activities will be exclusively for peaceful purposes. However, if other states

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¹ IAEA Board of Governors, *Implementation of the NPT safeguards agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, GOV/2003/40, June 6, 2003, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2003/gov2003-40.pdf>.

² «We are not seeking nuclear weapons because the Islamic Republic of Iran considers possession of nuclear weapons a sin... and believes that holding such weapons is useless, harmful and dangerous», as quoted by Associated Press, *Iran's supreme leader denies Tehran is seeking nuclear weapons*, in «the Guardian», February 22, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/22/iran-supreme-leader-nuclear-weapons-denial>.



will not accept ongoing uranium enrichment in Iran, then Iran will let them run the risks of starting a war over uranium enrichment. And if Iran will not agree to a framework of limitations and inspections that make others confident that it will not pursue nuclear weapons as it continues with enrichment, then Iran will invite others to take military action to prevent it from making nuclear weapons.

How GCC States Have Reacted

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) governments see Iran as a great threat to their regional autonomy, their political stability, and the management of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle. Wariness toward Iran reflects deep historical tensions between Shiites and Sunnis, between Persians and Arabs, and between the revolutionary Iranian republic and the Gulf monarchies.

Iran and the majority of Gulf states have nonetheless used diplomacy and balance-of-power tactics to avoid major confrontation. Bahrain's rulers are a Sunni minority in a majority Shia state and thus worry that Iran can and will encourage Shiites to agitate for political changes that it finds threatening. They have welcomed a major U.S. naval base in Bahrain as a form of insurance against Iranian interference in its internal affairs, including potential coercion. Qatar hosts significant U.S. military assets, has established a relatively stable *modus vivendi* with Iran, and feels no particular threat from it. Similarly, Kuwait and Iran have managed relatively stable relations without major direct conflicts of interest, as have Oman and Iran. Collectively, the GCC states see Iran's projection of influence into post-Saddam Iraq as a serious unwelcome shift in the regional balance of power.

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For political, economic, and historical reasons the two most important Gulf states for the purposes of this essay are Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Saudi Arabia feels an intense historical and civilizational rivalry with Iran predating the 1979 revolution. Both states compete for leadership of the Islamic world and for influence in shaping the political and strategic evolution of Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Palestine. Saudi leaders fear that Iran will seek to subvert the kingdom by mobilizing the Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia against U.S. power and influence. While Iran's greater size, economic potential, and social mobilization make it naturally the region's most powerful actor, Saudi Arabia has sought to be the leading power balancer in the region, with assistance from the United States.

It is difficult to know from public sources how the closed, monarchical gov-

ernments of the GCC truly think the Iranian challenge should be addressed. Leaders publicly seek to avoid provoking Iran and betraying their own private concerns. Privately, however, they send different messages to the American leaders whom they rely on for protection. The Wikileaks revelations offer rare insights.

Saudi leaders have addressed the Iranian challenge privately with American officials, and more unusual for states in the region, in public. King Abdullah reportedly has urged the U.S. to attack Iran to put an end to the nuclear program. Similarly, Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud, who served twenty four years as head of Saudi foreign intelligence, has at various times commented on Iran's nuclear progress. In a Washington appearance Turki said that military strikes on Iran «would be foolish and... tragic» in both human terms and because «the retaliation by Iran will be worldwide». Strikes, he said, would «only make the Iranians more determined to produce an atomic bomb. It will rally support for the government among the population, and it will not end the program. It will merely delay it if anything»³. On the other hand, Turki told a conference in Riyadh at the end of 2011 that, «if our efforts, and the efforts of the world community, fail to convince Israel to shed its weapons of mass destruction and to prevent Iran from obtaining similar weapons, we must, as a duty to our country and people, look into all options we are given, including obtaining these weapons ourselves»⁴.

The UAE and Iran have a territorial dispute and inherent Sunni-Shiite tensions, even as the two states' economies have in recent years become intertwined. The UAE claims three islands in the Gulf that are now under Iran's control – Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb – which were occupied by Iranian forces in November 1971. The UAE has requested that Iran resolve the dispute over the three islands through direct negotiations or by referring it to the International Court of Justice. Iran says that the three islands are under its sovereignty, and has thus welcomed neither negotiations nor international adjudication.

In balancing Iran's power and competing for Arab leadership it is tempting for Saudi Arabia, the UAE and perhaps others to turn to nuclear technology as part of a larger strategy to counter Iranian influence. It will be tempting for these countries to exaggerate what they can and will do in the nuclear domain. Matching words with deeds will be difficult, as it has been for most countries that seek to turn the always-promising potential of nuclear energy into reality. Moreover, latent nuclear capabilities will not fundamentally limit Iran's political and potential economic power in the region.

³ A. QUINN, *Saudi prince warns against any attack of Iran*, Reuters, November 15, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/15/us-iran-saudi-idUSTRE7AE2NE20111115>.

⁴ A. ALSHARIF - A. MCDOWALL, *Saudi Prince Turki urges nuclear option after Iran*, Reuters, December 6, 2011, <http://af.reuters.com/article/energyOilNews/idAFL5E7N62G920111206>.



Speculation on Four Most Likely Alternative Scenarios

How Gulf states will react to the next phases of the Iran nuclear crisis depends of course on what those phases are. Four alternative scenarios in Iran seem most likely.

Scenario one: the contest between Iran and the P5+1 continues through incremental moves that resolve nothing but stop short of war. The GCC states privately encourage greater pressure and resolve to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and send mixed signals regarding the necessity of military action. Iran continues to enrich uranium but does not increase the level of enrichment. It increases cooperation with the IAEA and does not conduct experiments that the IAEA assesses to have military dimensions. The international community responds to positive Iranian gestures by relieving some sanctions while maintaining others. Gulf Arab states remain anxious and contemplate hedging strategies, but the absence of a decisive move by Iran to build nuclear weapons gives them an incentive not to take risky, dramatic moves to seek nuclear weapons of their own.

Scenario two: a diplomatic breakthrough occurs that is ambitious enough to lead Iran and the major international powers (plus Israel) to conclude that Iran will have neither the intention nor the capability to acquire nuclear weapons in less than two years, and that this amount of warning time will be maintained indefinitely. The P5+1 might accomplish this by negotiating terms under which Iran continues enriching uranium but does so with limitations on the level and location of enrichment and explicit renunciation of activities related to nuclear weaponization. The U.S. and Iran remain highly mistrustful, but they agree not to use violence against each other and there are ways for each side to verify this. Such a framework is codified in a new UN Security Council resolution agreed by Iran, with parallel removal of sanctions and P5 commitment to severely respond to any violations of the agreement. Gulf Arab states welcome the breakthrough. The UAE and Saudi Arabia say that they, like Iran, will continue seeking to acquire peaceful civilian nuclear technology while calling on Israel to give up its nuclear weapons.

Scenario three: war. In the near term this would be initiated by Israel. Longer term, if Iran were to move clearly to acquire nuclear weapons, the U.S. could attack Iran's known nuclear infrastructure and military capabilities that could be used to retaliate against U.S. interests in the region.

Scenario four: Iran acquires nuclear weapons in sufficient quantity and with secure enough infrastructure that Israel and the U.S. conclude that military strikes would not effectively eliminate these capabilities for a significant duration.

Achieving the first two scenarios should remain the priority of international leaders. These scenarios probably would not prompt major actions by GCC

states. The scenarios of war or Iran acquiring nuclear weapons are the two wherein GCC reactions could be very interesting.

War

There are many prominent depictions of how dangerously Iran's leaders would act if and when they acquired nuclear weapons. It only makes sense to undertake military strikes to prevent Iran from acquiring these weapons if one assesses that it would not be possible to live tolerably with a nuclear-armed Iran.

Commentators who call for military action often make assumptions about how Iran would respond to being attacked that tend to be less detailed and more optimistic than those assumptions about how Iran would act if it were to acquire nuclear weapons. These scholars assume simultaneously that if Iran acquired nuclear weapons, its leaders would act more aggressively than they have in recent years, but that if Iran were attacked to prevent its acquisition of nuclear weapons Iranian leaders would reason carefully to minimize retaliatory actions.

Matthew Kroenig offers one prominent doomsday scenario of the consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran. He contends that Iran with nuclear weapons would be "emboldened," and thus increase its support to terrorists, engage in tougher coercive diplomacy, and employ more conventional aggression. Like many others, he asserts that Iran would cause global nuclear proliferation, as other states in the region would seek their own nuclear weapons, and as Iran transfers nuclear technology to U.S. enemies – other countries and/or terrorist groups. He anticipates that an Iran with a nuclear weapon would immediately limit U.S. freedom of action in the Middle East, as Tehran could threaten any U.S. political or military initiative in the Middle East with nuclear war. And while Kroenig admits that Iran would not intentionally initiate nuclear war, he argues that a small crisis between Iran and Israel could spiral out of control and result in a nuclear exchange that could draw the U.S. in as well⁵.

By contrast, one of the most intellectually honest treatments of a military scenario was offered by Reuel Marc Gerecht in 2006. A long-time advocate for preventive action against Iran, Gerecht writes that «we shouldn't have any illusions» about what this war would entail⁶. Gerecht notes that Iran would likely rebuild its nuclear facilities, but more securely and buried underground. The U.S. would need to be prepared to bomb Iran repeatedly to keep its government from rebuilding its nuclear capabilities.

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⁵ M. KROENIG, *Time to Attack Iran*, in «Foreign Affairs», 91, 1, January-February 2012, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136917/matthew-kroenig/time-to-attack-iran?page=show>.

⁶ R.M. GERECHE, *To Bomb, or Not to Bomb: That is the Iran Question*, in «The Weekly Standard», April 24, 2006, <http://www.aei.org/article/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/middle-east-and-north-africa/to-bomb-or-not-to-bomb/>.



Gerecht concludes that war with Iran could likely require a U.S. large-scale land invasion of the Islamic Republic, to verify the damage to Iran's nuclear facilities and/or respond to sustained and deadly Iranian reprisals. It would transpire over many years, possibly over a decade, and could go in a number of different directions⁷.

To analyze how war could affect the interests of GCC states, it is reasonable to assume that the posited military campaign would proceed less well than best-case scenarios and less badly than worst-case.

In the next year, Israel is more likely than the U.S. to instigate military strikes on Iran. However, even if Israel launched strikes without the support of the U.S., the U.S. would be impelled by its own interests to protect friendly Gulf states and the transit lines for energy exports through the Strait of Hormuz. Thus, the U.S. would communicate to Tehran that the United States would retaliate decisively against any Iranian attacks on U.S. forces, bases, and friends, and against Iranian efforts to close the Strait. Whether or not the U.S. supported initiation of military action against Iran, it would act militarily to counter Iranian retaliation against U.S. interests.

The likelihood of U.S. action to suppress Iranian retaliation could contain the repercussions of Israeli strikes against Iran to the benefit of GCC states. Iran could be dissuaded from launching missile attacks on Gulf Arab territories and interests, and from unleashing Revolutionary Guard naval assaults on energy production platforms and shipping in the Gulf.

Still, even under this optimistic scenario, oil prices would go up, damaging the global economy. Depending on whether and how Iran destroyed energy production and transit capabilities in the Gulf, the duration of price hikes could be relatively short or long. GCC states could benefit from higher prices, depending on whether and how much their production and shipping capabilities were affected.

Even under the assumption that Iran could be constrained from retaliating militarily, it could respond initially by rallying international support for UN action to condemn Israel's illegal aggression against it. If the UN Security Council did not take action against the attackers, Iran could threaten to exercise its legal right to withdraw from the NPT. In explaining the reasons for its withdrawal and expulsion of international inspectors, Iran could simply state that it had been attacked by a nuclear-armed state or states (Israel and/or the United States) and therefore has no other means of self-defense than to withdraw from the NPT and reassert the legal right to acquire nuclear weapons. In the ensuing international debate, many states and even more populations would side with Iran, creating a profound crisis for Israel and the U.S. and threatening the nuclear order in unprecedented ways. Israel would face international demands to relinquish its own nuclear arsenal, and a core group of non-nuclear-weapon states in the NPT

would threaten the future of the treaty if action were not taken to this end. By first pursuing such a diplomatic strategy, Iran could capitalize at home and abroad from its military restraint while avoiding the risks of a wider war. Throughout such a diplomatic crisis, energy prices would remain higher than ever, providing a windfall to Iran. And if its diplomatic demands were not met, Iran could still resort to more forceful responses later.

Whether or not Iran pursued a purely diplomatic strategy to withdraw from the NPT, Iran could continue its efforts to acquire nuclear weapon capabilities, though these efforts could be delayed significantly. Iran would likely expel international inspectors and arrest (or worse) any people it suspected of providing intelligence to foreigners on its nuclear activities. Iran would likely try to rebuild its nuclear infrastructure deep underground which, paired with the departure of inspectors, would make them less likely to be detected and targeted. These and other Iranian moves would greatly impair the international community's capacity to know whether and how Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons were proceeding.

Even if some Arab populations would be half-hearted in their condemnation of attacks on Iran, Shiite populations in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia could be mobilized to chal-

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lenge their governments and U.S. interests more forcefully. Populations in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and perhaps other states could become more militant in demanding that their governments make Israel "pay" for this action.

It is possible that military attacks on Iran could trigger unrest within the Iranian population and/or among ruling circles that could lead to a change of government. However, the current structure of the Iranian government, with great power bestowed on the Supreme Leader, is enshrined in the Iranian Constitution. Thus, deep changes in the nature of the Iranian state would require amendments or a re-writing of the Constitution. Perhaps a humiliating military defeat could initiate such a process, but the chances of this are less than the likelihood that the current regime would consolidate its power.

Policy Options in the Event of War

In the event of military strikes on Iran, Gulf Arab leaders would not face many large decisions, though they would be extremely anxious about what Iran would do to them and how their populations would respond. There likely would be significant differences between the Gulf leaders' public declarations and policies and what they actually would say and do secretly with the U.S. Their first priority would be to avoid serious public protests against their regimes. They would say



publicly that they had nothing to do with the attacks on Iran, hoping to dissuade Iran from retaliating against them and to otherwise avoid outrage from their own publics over yet another high-tech Israeli and/or U.S. military intervention against a Muslim state.

At the same time, they would feel the need to mobilize air defenses, naval defenses, and intelligence assets to detect and contain domestic disturbances. The management of these moves and potential decisions to use force would face the leaders of these governments with unprecedented challenges.

Dealing with a Nuclear-Armed Iran

The possibilities discussed above are more optimistic than many analyses of the implications of military strikes on Iran. If Iran's violent reactions to being struck – terrorism, retaliatory missile strikes, etc. – were not well contained the effect on Gulf states could be much worse. This invites the question considered below: whether the consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran would be so grave as to warrant the risks of war.

Few, if any, knowledgeable observers think that if Iran possessed nuclear weapons it would use them in offensive attacks against its Arab neighbors (or, for that matter, Israel or the United States). Conducting offensive war with nuclear weapons would merely invite retaliation that would destroy the Iranian regime, if not much of Iranian society. There is nothing in the history of the Islamic Republic that suggests its leaders would act so self-destructively.

The main value of nuclear weapons to the Iranian government would be to bolster its confidence that the U.S. and other states would not forcibly seek to overthrow it. Historically, states that possess nuclear weapons have not found these weapons to be very effective in coercing other states to do what they want, or to spare them from defeat in wars outside their territories. For example, the U.S. was defeated in Vietnam and the Soviet Union was defeated in Afghanistan, despite their enormous nuclear arsenals.

The U.S. nuclear monopoly has not enabled it to achieve its political objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan, or in Iran for that matter. Nor did Israel's nuclear arms prevent Egypt from initiating the 1973 war or Hezbollah from conducting the 2006 war. Pakistan's nuclear weapons did not enable it to avoid defeat in the 1999 Kargil war with India, though they probably helped deter India from escalating that war into Pakistani territory. These as well as other cases indicate that the only clear utility of nuclear weapons is to deter states from invading your territory.

An Iran that is more confident that others would not invade it does not pose an *additional* threat to other Gulf states. The GCC states may wish for a different regime in Iran, and in this sense could prefer that Iran not become more secure against invasion. But this does not mean that an Iran with a nuclear deterrent would pose existential threats to them. Indeed, the Gulf monarchies could be more threatened if democratization took hold in Iran (with or without nuclear weapons) and further undermined the legitimacy of the monarchs and sheikhs.

The biggest threats of a nuclear-armed Iran are not physical or matters of life or death on a large scale. Rather, the main injuries a nuclear-armed Iran would cause are to the pride and political self-confidence of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Turkey. Iran – Persia – would lord its nuclear status over its Arab neighbors and Turkey. Iranian leaders would exploit the perception that nuclear weapons are a major technical achievement and bestow regional hegemonic political power to win domestic support and to humiliate Sunni Arab neighbors. This would be profoundly upsetting to Arab monarchs in particular.

Policy Options for Gulf States if Iran Acquires Nuclear Weapons

The preceding analysis reflects historical experience with other radical states that acquired nuclear weapons. Even if the analysis is too optimistic, there is only a limited range of policy options that the Gulf states can consider in trying to co-exist with a nuclear-armed Iran. Indeed, policies for dealing with a nuclear-armed Iran are necessary even if military strikes are undertaken, because it is possible that Iran would still acquire nuclear weapons.

One way in which the Gulf states could respond to Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would be to seek (or welcome) the extension of more formal security guarantees by the U.S. and, perhaps, other powers such as France.

As long as the U.S. is perceived to exhibit a clear bias toward Israel and favoritism to governments that are relatively quiescent in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, public opinion in many Arab states will remain highly mistrustful of Washington

However, this option is fraught with complications and difficulties. As long as the U.S. is perceived to exhibit a clear bias toward Israel and favoritism to governments that are relatively quiescent in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, public opinion in many Arab states will remain highly mistrustful of Washington. During a time of political change in the Arab world the Gulf governments will want to avoid more open and formal associations with the U.S. if this could stimulate political agitation within them.

Nor would states being offered security guarantees thoroughly rely on them. Even staunch, democratic, and economically integral U.S. allies such as Japan and South Korea question Americans' commitment to their security, albeit behind closed doors and only for certain contingencies.



One way to enhance the credibility of security guarantees would be to make them legally binding through a treaty, as is the case with NATO. But this possibility exposes the underlying problem of the guarantor's affinity and credibility. It is difficult to imagine the U.S. Senate voting to ratify a treaty making robust security commitments to non-democratic states of the Persian Gulf that do not share American values. Would the U.S. agree to a legal commitment to intervene militarily on behalf of the UAE if Iran moved to annex the disputed Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunb islands?

During the past ten years of the Iranian nuclear crisis some analysts have suggested that the U.S. could or should extend *nuclear* deterrence to Gulf states, meaning that the U.S. would be willing to use its nuclear weapons to deter Iran from committing aggression against other Gulf states, or to defeat an Iranian aggression. However, the willingness of the U.S. Congress and public to support a commitment by the U.S. to risk nuclear war on behalf of Gulf states would be highly questionable. More realistic would be reliance on conventional military power to deter Iran's inherently limited capacity to project military power into the GCC. The invocation of U.S. nuclear threats into the Middle East would give Iran and other anti-American elements in the region the opportunity to portray the U.S. as a potential nuclear aggressor. For these and other reasons, it is not reasonable to expect the U.S. to offer nuclear guarantees in advance of Iran's acquiring a nuclear arsenal and before Iran demonstrated that it was intent on acting more aggressively in the region.

A second way in the Gulf states could respond to Iran's development of a nuclear weapon would be to acquire their own domestic deterrents. Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE are both parties to the NPT, Saudi leaders have suggested privately and publicly that the kingdom would counter Iran by acquiring nuclear weapons too.

The UAE has already laid the foundation for its nuclear power program. Abu Dhabi has compensated for its lack of indigenous expertise in nuclear technology and the absence of the necessary social infrastructure for regulating the safety and security of nuclear industry by hiring foreign experts to perform these functions. It signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with South Korea in 2009 and contracted with a South Korean commercial consortium to construct four power reactors by 2020. To reaffirm that its program is solely for peaceful purposes, the UAE has formally committed not to acquire or operate uranium enrichment or plutonium separation facilities on its soil. Breaking this commitment, which would be necessary if the UAE sought nuclear weapons, would cause South Korea to threaten its nuclear cooperation, and could cause the U.S., France and others to reduce security commitments to the UAE. While the UAE would be heavily constrained from actually acquiring nuclear weapon capabilities, its

robust nuclear energy program could give it some of the aura associated with being a “nuclear state”.

This leaves Saudi Arabia as the regional power more likely to explore a domestic deterrent, but it is not clear how its leaders could or would acquire a nuclear weapon. To date Saudi Arabia lacks the natural resources, technological capabilities and human resources to produce nuclear weapons. It lacks uranium deposits and the technicians and equipment necessary to enrich uranium or separate plutonium. It does not have any operating nuclear reactors, either for research or electricity production. The kingdom has recently announced plans to have sixteen nuclear power reactors built by 2030, but it would rely on foreign suppliers to do this. Most experts in nuclear affairs conclude that this timetable is completely unrealistic.

Furthermore, there is no basis for Saudi Arabia to claim that it has any legitimate civilian need to acquire nuclear fuel production capability, including equipment and facilities to enrich uranium or reprocess spent fuel. Any moves to acquire fuel-cycle capabilities with no plausible civilian applications would arouse strong suspicions about its compliance with its NPT commitment to not seek nuclear weapons. All current legitimate suppliers of fuel-cycle technologies and know-how would be loath to export to Saudi Arabia in the absence of plausible civilian requirements in Saudi Arabia.

Thus, the kingdom would need to rely on illicit supply networks, with attendant risks to both Saudi Arabia and potential suppliers in an environment where suspicions would be high. However, it seems more likely that the primary value of nuclear weapons for Saudi Arabia would be political-psychological, to counter the status and consequential arrogance that a nuclear-armed Iran could display. Nuclear weapons deployed by a foreign power – for example, Pakistan – would not satisfy this desire; Pakistani or other foreign assistance to Saudi Arabia could, if Saudi Arabia developed enough indigenous expertise and infrastructure to claim that the resultant nuclear capability was “Saudi”. However, developing the level of expertise and infrastructure necessary to produce and manage a small nuclear arsenal, even with foreign help, would take a number of years.

Taking these considerations into account, if Iran acquired nuclear weapons – or continues to move in that direction without strong and verifiable limitations – the Gulf states would probably prefer a mix of hedging policies and actions to increase their capacities to deter and contain Iran from intimidating them, including arrangements with the U.S., France and others to procure sophisticated arms, conduct joint military exercises, and cooperate in intelligence gathering and sharing, while issuing diplomatic warnings to Iran that aggressive behavior will be countered.



The UAE and Saudi Arabia would want to be perceived to be acquiring nuclear weapons capabilities of their own. But they also would want to avoid potential sanctions or countervailing pressures which would arise if they acted explicitly to develop nuclear weapons in violation of the NPT. Thus they would follow Iran's example and seek to create an aura of generic power from a nascent nuclear power program that would include foreign-built reactors. The aim would be to deny Iran advantages in prestige and the aura of power that come with nuclear weapons. Saudi and/or UAE potential to acquire nuclear weapon capabilities also would give Iran an incentive not to bully them into exercising this potential. Ambiguity will abound, both in what the two states intend to do, and in what they are doing in the nuclear domain.

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Demonstrations of capabilities and policies to contain Iranian power projection would be paired with diplomatic efforts – often secret – to establish “rules of engagement” that aimed to prevent crises that could escalate to the use of military force on a scale that

could introduce risks of nuclear conflict. Past experiences in U.S.-Soviet, U.S.-Chinese, and Indian-Pakistani relations suggest that it would take more than a decade before a modicum of shared confidence in deterrence stability could be created. This prognosis does not portend inevitable disaster, but it does suggest that enlightened and highly focused leadership would be necessary in all of the states involved.

Conclusion

The Gulf Cooperation Council states, like the rest of the world, would benefit from a negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis, or at least a continuation of the current uneasy standoff. However, an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities or an Iranian push to produce nuclear weapons would pose excruciating risks and dilemmas for the two most economically and politically significant Gulf states, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. These risks and dilemmas would be political more than physical or military. Much would depend on how Iran behaved: if it were attacked, it could respond violently against GCC states and U.S. bases with missiles and other means, which would create post-war dynamics that are impossible to predict for all involved. Or Iran could hold its fire and mobilize and manipulate popular opinion in the Arab states, including Shi-ite minorities, against monarchical governments that appear complicit with Is-

rael and the U.S. If Iran develops nuclear weapons – which could also happen after Israeli or U.S. military attacks on it – a similar set of difficult but not existential political challenges would face the Gulf states. Iran would more confidently project itself as the region's major power, and could feel emboldened to support more assertive political mobilization by militant groups against the monarchical Sunni regimes in the Gulf, if these regimes did not defer to Iran. Faced with a more self-confident and assertive Iran, the Gulf states would probably pursue a mix of hedging policies and actions to increase their capacities to deter and contain Iran from intimidating them, for prestige considerations as well as military exigency.